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CORD MEYER

Savimbi on the defensive

After three years of singular success in expanding the control of his 50,000 black guerrillas over more than a third of Angola, Jonas Savimbi, the leader of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), suddenly finds himself overextended and on the defensive, as the Angolan army of the MPLA Marxist regime pushes southward toward UNITA's main base in the southeastern corner of the country.

On the basis of accurate intelligence reporting, Reagan officials confirm Mr. Savimbi's charge that there has been a massive buildup in the size and sophistication of the Soviet armament made available to the MPLA forces and to the 35,000 Cuban troops sent in to help them. For the first time, a coordinated assault against UNITA is being mounted by MiG-23s, Sukhoi fighter bombers, Hind-24 helicopter gunships, and heavy artillery.

Reagan officials also confirm that there is hard evidence that Soviet and Cuban officers played a large role in planning this 50-day-old offensive, although they have no independent confirmation of Mr. Savimbi's allegation that Soviet offi-

cers are actually flying some of the planes and are directing the artillery fire.

The UNITA representative in Washington claims that intercepted communications from the battlefield in the Russian language are evidence of direct Soviet involvement.

While Fidel Castro is playing down the extent of the Cuban role in this Angolan fighting because of the domestic unpopularity of the war and his fear of provoking an American reaction, there are reports that Cuban replacements have recently been sent to Angola on commercial planes from Havana.

In the face of this major offensive — which General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev must have approved — against one of the most effective anti-Communist resistance movements in the Third World, Reagan officials maintain that "there is no danger of a real death blow to UNITA."

State Department experts expect that in three or four weeks the rainy season will make roads impassable, and they point out that in the past the charismatic and resilient Mr. Savimbi has always been able to keep his forces intact by fading away into the bush when confronted with superior firepower.

But if this offensive continues to roll and Mr. Savimbi's forces are threatened with dispersal and destruction, the administration faces a complex and difficult decision. Reagan officials completely discount the propaganda from the MPLA side that Mr. Savimbi is a puppet of the South Africans. After 10 years of war against the Portuguese colonial power and 10 years more against Cuban troops and the unelected one-party MPLA regime, Mr. Savimbi's credentials as a black national leader are sound.

With solid support among his Ovimbundu tribe, which makes up 40 percent of the Angolan population, Mr. Savimbi enjoys a wide following among all tribal groups and has stressed his willingness to join with moderate MPLA leaders in a coalition government. He has been a consistent and outspoken opponent of the system of apartheid in South Africa.

But due to his geographical location, he has had to rely on supply lines controlled by the South African government, and he admits to receiving material help from the Botha regime. If Mr. Savimbi now has to rely exclusively on South African logistical support in his hour of need, it will be easier for the MPLA to brand him a tool of white racists. UNITA's cause will be weakened, and Mr. Savimbi's defeat would result in the takeover of all of Angola by a Soviet-supported Marxist regime with destabilizing consequences for the entire region.

It is for this reason that some Reagan officials are already giving careful thought to the range of options that open up Oct. 1, when the Clark Amendment officially expires. Repealed in July by the Congress, this law specifically prohibited any kind of U.S. assistance, overt or covert, to any resistance group in Angola. The very fact of its repeal creates some restraint on MPLA ambitions, because they now know that the United States will be free to intervene.

State Department officials to date are very reluctant to consider any kind of economic or military assistance to Mr. Savimbi to give him an alternative to growing dependence on South Africa. They fear that the Soviets and Cubans are in a better position to escalate.

On the other hand, there is recognition at high levels in the administration that President Reagan cannot stand aside and passively watch the destruction by Soviet arms and surrogates of perhaps the best-organized and most brilliantly led national resistance movement in the underdeveloped world.

While recognizing that Mr. Savimbi may have no choice but to rely on additional South African aid in the present emergency, both Reagan officials and congressional leaders need to consider better ways of helping him.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.